

Portland Harbor Superfund Site – Local Stories

Transcript: Mamelang Memela, Portland Harbor Community Coalition and Braided Rivers Campaign

...grateful for this opportunity, and I hope you enjoy the stories that I put together today for you all. So, I wanted to start the story with these two pictures. I captured both of these images on my cell phone a little over two years apart. One of the pictures I took in Portland and the other I took in Paris – I'd ask you to guess which is which, but I have yet to see swans in the Willamette. And, honestly, when I think about it, if I did see swans in the Willamette, I don't know if that would be a good or bad sign. When I was trying to figure out what to share with you all this evening, I went back to two pictures from two seemingly different cities. But, in looking closer at these two images, I noticed that in both of them I was sitting on the east bank with friends during the evening to enjoy the sunset and decompress after a long day. This is something that I'm reminded isn't a reality for all people living near a river even in both of these cities and a thought that I would like to keep in mind as I work on Superfund issues and other environmental justice issues in Portland through coalitions also with a lot of people on this call today.

My family is from South Africa, and in the traditional society of my father's people, the Zulu, rivers and lakes play an important role in our daily lives and activity, especially for traditional women's collective culture. Rivers and lakes are places for women and children to gather, work, and play. I actually remember visiting my clan's homeland and seeing women carrying buckets and clay pots on their heads and arms from the river and back to their homesteads. This must be an image a lot of you may have seen in different campaigns that talk about African water. Often, these women walk for kilometers to find clean water but they are always in the company of another person. My mother's people, the Pedi, are from the North of South Africa and inhabit a region where water is scarce and sacred in nature. Like me, her family settled in an area with a well. But as the region faces more frequent droughts, I've seen and experienced the level of the water table declining over the years.

Having been raised between these two cultures and experiencing others through friends, acquaintances, and my travels, I realize that water is often a central body and important aspect, both literally and mystically. In the physical world, rivers, lakes, and seas are entities around which human and non-human communities live and connect to each other and the rest of the world. Although the Collaborative does not always have the opportunity to physically meet along the river, and I know earlier we talked about the possibility of coming back together in person, hopefully that will happen. The Willamette River is essentially what brings us together in these spaces and connects all of us in our work. When I moved here for college, I did not know much about Oregon or the Pacific Northwest, or even the Willamette. My personal journey and appreciation for the city started through canvassing in East Portland with Friends of Trees, and I learned, I came to understand more about the inequalities and impacts of lower tree canopy coverage.

I have since become embodied in the Willamette River since working at PHCC on the Superfund site and most importantly as a Northwest and former Downtown Portland resident. Through this work, I have come to learn more about the Multnomah, Kathlamet, Klickitat as Yellowash mentioned earlier, and the Klackamas bands of Chinook and other tribes that have inhabited these lands for thousands of years. They gathered their food and traded with each other along the Willamette, the Columbia, and their tributaries. Tribal sovereigns continue to practice their traditions and ceremonies in this river and fish, as do many other communities who call this space home. Within the Braided River campaign, we have an art group which is working on a portrait project which was just the slide before this one and we invited local artists and muralists to paint portraits that represent the people of various communities

that have lived along the river and worked and played and have since become displaced as a result of discriminatory zoning practices, land use laws, and have also been exposed to harmful chemicals and pollutants. In this project, we hope to connect the people and stories of the past to the present so we can collectively envision a future, and acknowledge, and begin to repair the harm that was and continues to be done to this day. There are still communities in Linnton and Northwest Portland living and working near fossil fuel tanks and industry, and are at risk of being displaced and currently exposed to harmful pollutants.

I know the story of the Willamette does not start or end in the moment we are living in and will continue on beyond any of our lives, even mine and I am not that old yet, but the Willamette and its surrounding communities have and will face many challenges in their course. There is a Zulu proverb that goes [*speaking Zulu*] which literally means “every course of water has its source,” and though I know the literal source of the Willamette is the Columbia, I also know that every living and non-living entity, whether it be a person from the past or present or any of our favorite fish and other lovely river critters have an impact on its course. I hope that every person who comes into contact with the river, especially people who have the power to change its course, do so for the benefit of current and future generations. I look forward to hearing your Willamette stories in subsequent meetings and thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my story.